



National Career Readiness Certificate Opens Doors for Alaska Cadets

The Organization

Alaska Military Youth Academy
National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program
Fort Richardson Army Post
Anchorage, Alaska

The Academic Challenge

Providing graduating cadets with a marketable workplace credential, in addition to a high school diploma and/or GED

The Solution

- Integrate training into existing curriculum
- Test cadets with WorkKeys® assessments
- Issue National Career Readiness Certificates upon graduation

The Results

- Instructors now reinforce traditional classroom instruction with complementary WorkKeys training to provide real-world relevance of core content
- Cadets gain confidence as they work through the online training curriculum in the Academy's computer lab
- In the most recent graduating class of 136 cadets, 132 (97 percent) earned a Bronze-level National Career Readiness Certificate or better

Academy and ChalleNGe Program Overview

The mission of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program is to intervene in and reclaim the lives of at-risk youth to produce program graduates with the values, skills, education, and self-discipline necessary to succeed as adults. (The capitalized "NG" in the program name refers to the National Guard.)

One of 33 ChalleNGe programs across the nation, authorized and funded through the National Guard Bureau of the Department of Defense, the Alaska Military Youth Academy's ChalleNGe program is a community-based program that leads, trains, and mentors at-risk youth so they are equipped with life-coping and educational skills.

According to John T. "Tom" Hamill, principal and lead instructor at the Academy, the ChalleNGe program focuses on 16- to 19-year-old Alaskans who have dropped out of an education program. "We attempt to return them to an education, training, or workplace environment and hopefully help them reclaim their lives."

The Academy has been in existence for about 15 years, making it one of the longest-running ChalleNGe programs. Consisting of a 5½-month quasi-military residential phase, followed by a 12-month post-residential phase, the program graduates an average of 130 cadets each cycle. There is one residential cycle from April to August and another from October to February.

Hamill describes the program as "a holistic approach" covering eight core components:

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| 1. Leadership/followership | 5. Physical fitness |
| 2. Responsible citizenship | 6. Health and hygiene |
| 3. Service to community | 7. Job skills |
| 4. Life-coping skills | 8. Academic excellence |

Potential cadets must be drug-free, they must be out of trouble with the law, and they cannot have a high school diploma. Prior to acceptance into the residential phase of the program, about 200 potential cadets are invited to a two-week pre-challenge program at Fort Richardson Army Post. There is usually some attrition during this phase as the prospective cadets face demanding physical and disciplinary challenges.

Upon successful completion of the pre-challenge phase, cadets begin the 5½-month residential phase. Hamill reports that the majority of cadets complete the full program. The State of Alaska requires the Academy to have a minimum of 125 cadets; they have had as many as 163.

"Anything in the 130–150 range is a good number for us," says Hamill. The Academic Excellence Team of five instructors reporting to Hamill is responsible for the classroom and individual instruction leading to a diploma or GED and a National Career Readiness Certificate. Of the 136 graduates in the most recent cycle, 132 earned a National Career Readiness Certificate—a 97 percent success rate.

“One of the best things my team and I can do is help these kids earn a marketable credential before they leave the Academy, and that’s just what the National Career Readiness Certificate provides.”

*John T. “Tom” Hamill,
principal and lead instructor,
Alaska Military Youth Academy*

WorkKeys and the National Career Readiness Certificate

Hamill first learned about ACT WorkKeys assessments in the mid-1990s when he was with the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award-winning Chugach School District, spanning 22,000 square miles of south central Alaska. When he joined the Alaska Military Youth Academy as its principal in 2007, he instituted the assessments and Certificate as part of the curriculum. Cadets may access WIN training modules in the Academy’s computer lab to build their skills and prepare for their WorkKeys assessments in Applied Mathematics, Reading for Information, and Locating Information. Hamill and his team work toward getting cadets up to Level 4 in WIN before they take the proctored WorkKeys assessments to attempt to qualify for a National Career Readiness Certificate.

Hamill states that “the training modules and assessments complement the overall classroom curriculum. One of the best things my team and I can do is help these kids earn a marketable credential before they leave the Academy, and that’s just what the National Career Readiness Certificate provides.”

Hamill believes that as employers become increasingly aware of just what a Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum Certificate means, the perceived value will rise for job seekers as well as employers looking for solid performers.

‘Selling’ The Certificate to Academy Cadets

When the Alaska Military Youth Academy cadets begin the residential program, they are given the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), which provides a literacy level score of 0.0 (below first-grade level) to 12.9, the highest score attainable. (A TABE score of 12.9 refers to the final or ninth month of twelfth grade, representing high school graduation capability or above.) “About one-third of our cadets score below the fourth-grade level on the TABE pretest,” reports Hamill, “which by definition, is functionally illiterate. Many of them have never been successful academically. Their self-esteem is low, and many of them fear and dread the classroom and testing.” This makes it more difficult to convince the cadets of the value of the training and testing to earn The Certificate, but Hamill and his team believe the effort is worthwhile.

“I start by telling them why The Certificate is a good thing to have, why they should value it, where it will take them, and I try to gain their trust that the time and effort they invest will have meaning well into their future.” Hamill says that most of the WIN training and WorkKeys testing takes place in the last 6–8 weeks of the 5½-month residential phase. “As they begin to see their WIN scores rise, they gain confidence. And when they pass their first WorkKeys assessment with a 3 or better, you can just see the excitement and momentum build. They often want to take the second and third assessments right away once they have a taste of success.”

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*Kathleen Watkins,
project manager,
Kodiak Island Borough
School District*

The Academic Excellence Team sees WorkKeys and The Certificate as a meaningful part of all they do. “They really provide our young people with options—options they may never have considered before entering the program,” says Hamill. “Earning The Certificate has become a significant motivator. We believe it helps open doors for our cadets.”

As the cadets graduate, they are presented with a portfolio containing all documentation earned while at the Academy. “The National Career Readiness Certificate is probably one of the most important,” says Hamill. “It’s a truly objective measure of an individual’s skills critical to on-the-job success. It’s accepted nationwide and shows that the cadet is ready to move on. For many of them, the Academy is their last chance. I love what we do here. I truly believe we save lives and get young people back on a productive path.”

The Alaska National Career Readiness Story

Beginning with the 2010–11 school year, all Alaska high school juniors will take the three WorkKeys assessments that power the National Career Readiness Certificate.

Marcia Olson, program manager of the Alaska Career Ready program for the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, says that after three years of pilot testing, Alaska is ready to move forward with statewide testing beginning fall 2010. “One of our goals is that students begin to make that vital connection between academics and careers.” As of April 2010, Olson reports that more than 2,000 Alaska high school students have earned National Career Readiness Certificates, with 75 percent earning a Silver- or Gold-level Certificate.

The Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development is collaborating with the Department of Education & Early Development in the Career Ready initiative. WorkKeys assessments and the National Career Readiness Certificate are being implemented in Alaska Job Centers and with partner agencies.

Another Application of The Certificate with At-Risk Youth in Alaska

In Kodiak, Alaska, the Kodiak Island Borough School District has partnered with the Alaska Job Center network of the Department of Labor & Workforce Development to offer a program known as The Learning Café and Career Center. Serving clients from 14 to 24 years of age, this program seeks to bring back young people who have fallen through the cracks of educational preparation. Without a GED, high school diploma, or job skills, these clients often lack direction for their future.

The Learning Café provides a menu of opportunities that may be fashioned into an individualized plan to help each client get back on track. Individuals have the opportunity to develop workplace skills using KeyTrain Career Ready 101 training, leading to WorkKeys assessments and a National Career Readiness Certificate to augment their GED or high school diploma.

“With Alaska adopting the National Career Readiness Certificate throughout the state, we feel our young people will be a step above other applicants when transitioning into the job market,” says project manager Kathleen Watkins.

